

PLANTING ONIONS

Onions need fertile, carefully worked, moist soil with good drainage. They can be replanted for several years in the same spot so it is worth the effort to prepare a good bed for them. Work in two pounds or more of well-rotted manure or compost for every 5 feet of row, and apply 1 pound of 5-10-15 fertilizer for every 20 feet of row.

PLANTING GLOBE OR SPANISH TYPE ONIONS: Globe onions are hardy, and their seeds can be planted in the garden early in the spring. Home gardeners may sow seeds indoors about 12 weeks before the outdoor planting date. Sow seeds 1/2" deep. Another popular method is to plant onion "sets" or small bulbs because this shortens the time to maturity by about four to six weeks and is more reliable than starting the plants from seeds. Plant onion sets as soon as the ground can be worked. Place them 4 inches apart, 1 inch deep, in rows 12 inches apart. The seedlings can be transplanted outdoors in the same way.

If you are starting globe onions from seeds, sow the seeds as soon as the ground can be worked. Sow them about 1 inch apart and about 1/2 inch deep. When the seedlings reach 6 inches, thin them to stand 4 inches apart. Red and Spanish onions are also available in April and May in packs. Usually these pre-sown packs will contain 100 or more transplants, ready to go into the garden. This is less work than starting seeds indoors and faster than sowing seed directly into the garden in spring.

PLANTING GREEN ONIONS AND SHALLOTS FROM SEED: One way to grow green bunching onions is to plant seeds close together in clusters - about six to a cluster. Because you restrict their growing space by doing this, the plants will be forced to form long, white stems. They can be harvested within 8-12 weeks. Green bunching onions are also available in packs as above.

TENDING ONIONS: Globe onions, green bunching onions and shallots have shallow root systems therefore need frequent watering and careful weeding. To keep the weeds down, hoe shallowly between rows; within the rows pull out the weeds by hand.

The plants will also need additional fertilizer while they are growing. When they are 8-10 inches tall, spread a band of fertilizer along both sides of each row at the rate of 1/2 pound for every 25 feet of row. To avoid disturbing roots, soak the fertilizer into the soil by watering.

HARVESTING ONIONS: Globe onions are ready for harvest about 16-20 weeks after seeds have been sown, or 12-15 weeks after planting out sets or seedlings. The onion tops wither as the bulbs reach maturity, turning yellow and then brown. You can speed up the maturation process - and produce larger bulbs - by bending the tops over when the outer leaves turn yellow. Two weeks later loosen the bulbs by pushing a spading fork beneath them and lifting them slightly. In another two weeks lift out the bulbs with the fork. You can either cut the tops off an inch from the bulb, or leave them on for braiding after the onions have dried. Spread the bulbs in a warm, airy place for a few days until they are completely dry. then braid them and hang them up; hang them up in mesh bags or store them loosely in shallow, open boxes. The storage area should be cool and moderately humid.

You can begin harvesting green bunching onions and shallots when the bulbs have reached 1/4-1/2 inch in diameter. The only way to determine the size is to pull up a green onion and examine it. Once bunching onions start maturing, pull them up only as you need them - they can be stored for no more than about two weeks. Like onions, green bunching onions and shallots should be completely dried before storage.

TYPES OF ONION

SPANISH (GLOBE): Popular eating fresh for sandwiches, hamburgers. Large white or red, both sweet.

WHITE: For pickling and preserving. May be left growing longer for green eating onions (no brown skin).

MULTIPLIERS: Multiple shoots of 3-5 green bunching onions produced from each bulb. Tops may be used for salads. Leave in longer for cooking onions.

SETS: A long-lasting firm onion used for storing and cooking.

SHALLOTS: A distinctive type of onion similar to the multiplier type. The flavour is milder than most onions.